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March 09, 2020

Is The Coronavirus Really More Dangerous Than The Flu?

Today the financial markets finally recognized the economic damage the novel Coronavirus will cause.

The price war in the crude oil markets which Russia initiated did not cause today's stock market fall but it also did not help. While cheap oil is supposed to be good for the economy the drop will also cause significant damage in the U.S. financial markets as the whole fracking industry in the United States is laden with debt and is now destined to be wiped out. Expect crude prices to sink to $20 per barrel as frantic overproduction and a drop in demand due to the virus coincide. Russia is well positioned to win this price war. Others are not.

It is the virus pandemic that causes the downturn in stock markets. But what makes the Sars-CoV-2 virus, as the novel Coronavirus is now officially known, so dangerous? The Covid-19 disease the virus causes is basically a flu though its seems to be one of the more severe kinds.

But it is a totally NEW kind of flu and that makes all the difference.

Each year some 15% of the world population will be infected with one or more of the dozens of flu viruses we know. The people get ill and most will recover while they also develop some immunity against the specific virus they were infected with. Over the years this sums up to a basic immunity level within our societies. So many people already had a flu from the well known viruses that most of them will not get infected during another flu season. We have also developed vaccines against the most well known viruses. They help to keep the people who work in health care on their job even when many new flu patients come in.

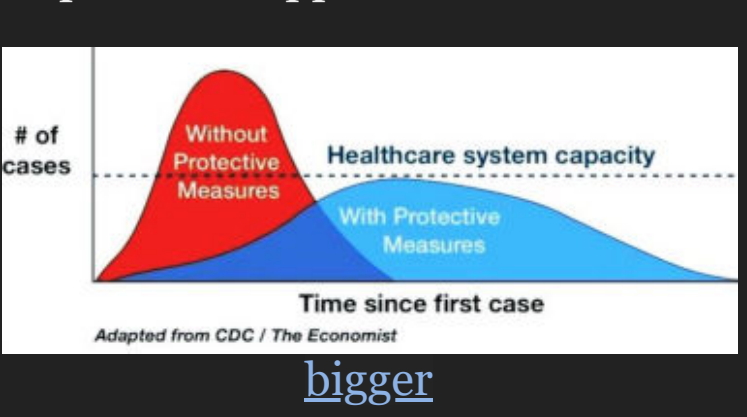
But when a new viruses evolves everything is different. Our societies do not have a basic immunity against a new virus. Without countermeasures many more people will get sick during the first, second and third wave of a new virus onslaught than during a normal flu season. Health care staff will also get infected and must quarantine itself. Some health care workers will probably die. Hospitals will become overwhelmed and the health care system will break down just as it did in Wuhan, China. The breakdown of the health care system also leads to a much larger number of virus death than under a working health care system.

Here is a surgeon in Bergamo, Italy, describing such a situation:

> The cases multiply, up to a rate of 15-20 hospitalizations a day all for the same reason. The results of the swabs now come one after the other: positive, positive, positive. Suddenly the emergency room is collapsing. Emergency provisions are issued: help is needed in the emergency room. A quick meeting to learn how the to use to emergency room EHR and a few minutes later I'm already downstairs, next to the warriors on the war front. The screen of the PC with the chief complaint is always the same: fever and respiratory difficulty, fever and cough, respiratory insufficiency etc ... Exams, radiology always with the same sentence: bilateral interstitial pneumonia. All needs to be hospitalized. Some already need to be intubated, and go to the ICU. For others, however, it is late. ICU is full, and when ICUs are full, more are created. Each ventilator is like gold: those in the operating rooms that have now suspended their non-urgent activity are used and the OR become an ICU that did not exist before.

A health care system that is overwhelmed with Covid-19 cases can no longer take care of regular health cases. People with an acute heart attack, with diabetes problems, or kids who have fallen off a bicycle will find that the hospitals are full and unable to care for them.

The only way to prevent such a catastrophic development is to spread out the timeline during which the epidemic happens.



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We can do that by lowering the reproductive number of the disease. Under normal circumstance one sick person will infect two, three or even many more healthy ones. We can lower that number by prohibiting large congregations, by isolating infected persons and by good hygiene.

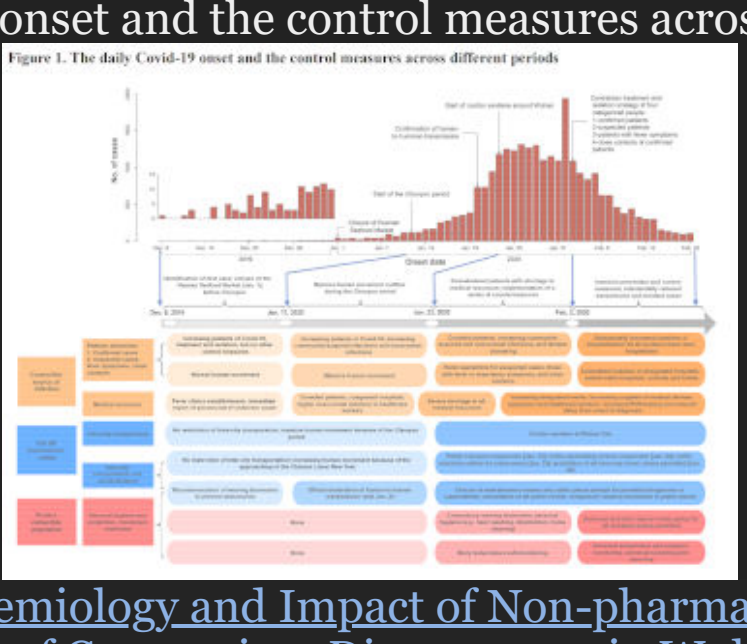
People who test positive or show symptoms need to be quarantined. Everyone needs to be made aware of the dangers and learn how to avoid them. Washing ones hands helps as soap easily destroys the fatty lipid layer that forms the skin of the virus.

The control measures China took in Wuhan were designed to drive the reproduction numbers down.

> The effective reproductive number [in Wuhan] dropped from 3.86 before interventions to 0.32 post interventions.

Some of the measures China took were severe but they worked:

The daily Covid-19 onset and the control measures across different periods



Source: Evolving Epidemiology and Impact of Non-pharmaceutical Interventions on the Outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 in Wuhan, China (pdf)
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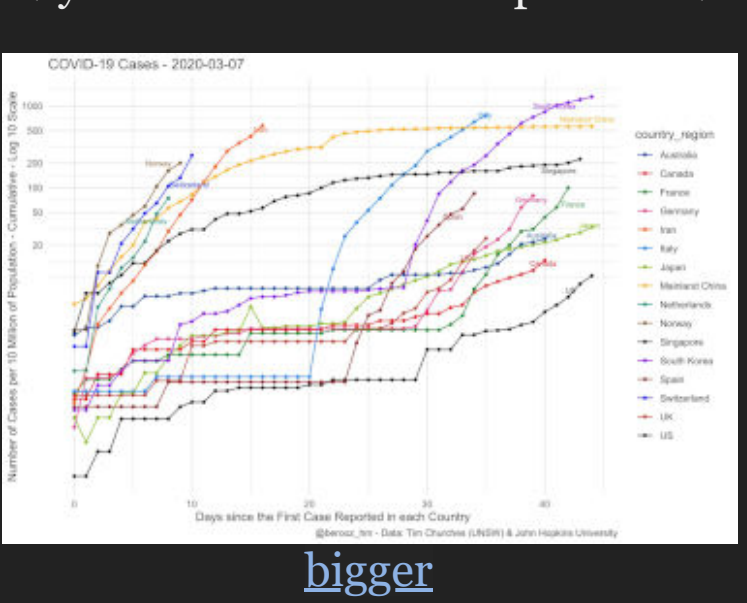
South Korea has also demonstrated how quick and early action can keep the numbers manageable.

After the virus has passed through our societies in two or three slow waves our communities will have developed a sufficient basic immunity level. In a year or two we may even have a vaccine against it. The virus will then become a relatively harmless addition to the ones we already know.

An example for this is the Hong Kong flu of 1968. The then new H3H2 virus infected 500.000 Hong Kong residents. In 1968 and 1969 it killed more than a million people worldwide even though it had a death rate below 0.5%. Our populations are now largely immune to it and an H3H2 vaccine is now part of the general cocktail of a flu vaccination.

No country will be spared by this virus and the impact will be similar everywhere.



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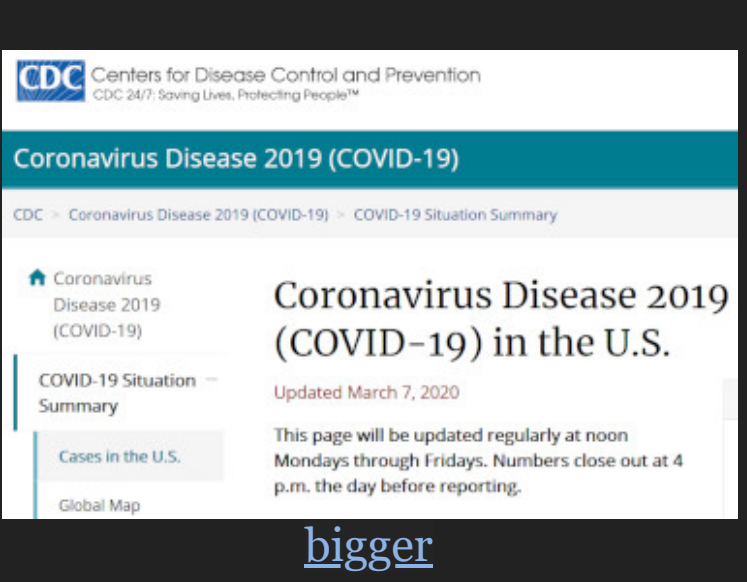
What must be done now is to flatten the curves, to lower the number of Covid-19 infections so our health care systems can cope with the epidemic.

In the United States the Sars-CoV-2 epidemic is still seen as a Monday to Friday problem.


CDC Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CDC 24/7: Saving Lives, Protecting People™
Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)
CDC › Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) › COVID-19 Situation Summary
Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)
COVID-19 Situation Summary
Cases in the U.S.
Global Map

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in the U.S.

Updated March 7, 2020

This page will be updated regularly at noon Mondays through Fridays. Numbers close out at 4 p.m. the day before reporting.

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The reason for this is that the president and a significant part of the U.S. population have yet to understand the issue.

> Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump - 14:47 UTC · Mar 9, 2020
>
> So last year 37,000 Americans died from the common Flu. It averages between 27,000 and 70,000 per year. Nothing is shut down, life & the economy go on. At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases of CoronaVirus, with 22 deaths. Think about that!

This is not a common flu. This is a NEW flu. We have zero basic immunity against it. Without countermeasures the number of cases will explode and there will be many serious ones. They will overwhelm the health care systems and that makes all the difference.

All countries need to test as many people as possible to isolate positive cases. People who test positive but show no symptoms should not be send home to their families. China has learned that doing that only creates new clusters of cases as all family members are then likely to get sick. Those who develop symptoms must be isolated separately and with access to care. Only the 20% who will develop serious complications should be admitted to dedicated hospitals.

The U.S. must take measures to make tests available and free for all. It must also deliver the necessary healthcare free of charges. The National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) Definitive Care Reimbursement Program can be used to carry the costs.

There needs to be some form of incentive for everyone to take sick leave when necessary. The behavior below is dangerous but the man had likely no other choice.

> ABC News @abcnews - 1:24 UTC · Mar 8, 2020
>
> #BREAKING: Authorities say a man with coronavirus ignored instructions to self-isolate pending test results, instead working several shifts at Hobart's Grand Chancellor Hotel.

People must be made able to pay their bills even when they are sent into quarantine. The simplest way to achieve that is to make sick leave pay mandatory by law. Undocumented immigrants must be able to seek tests and healthcare without fear of deportation. That requires a change in the current mandatory notification scheme.

More economic measures will have to be taken to restart the economy after the slump the pandemic will cause. Large and diverse government spending program will have the best effects. Tax breaks for the rich will not do.

Today's market crash and Trump's ignorant and disastrous handling of the pandemic make it now less likely that he will get reelected. The pandemic also guarantees that the demand of medicare for all will become a huge winner.

Posted by b on March 9, 2020 at 17:54 UTC | Permalink

Comments

it's going to be a shitshow in the u.s., trump is mainly interested in deflecting blame and propping up the stock market, and the dnc is mainly interested in saving their jobs and gravy train by kneecapping sanders; neither gives a crap about dealing effectively with the virus.

Posted by: pretzelattack | Mar 9 2020 18:01 utc | 1

Splendid B, now you really talk sense. However, one doubt remains - it has not yet been proven that people who have fallen ill with Covid-19 and then recovered are then really immune to further infection. Hopefully this is the case. Unfortunately, there are also counterexamples.

Posted by: Pnyx | Mar 9 2020 18:26 utc | 2

I wouldn't bet on South Korea being successful in containing the COVID-19. The drastic reduction of March 9th may be a statistical forgery generated by the fact that the South Korean government's numbers are coming essentially from the epicenters/ground zero (Daegu and Gyeongsang):

New cases of infections drop for third day

Circumstancial evidence shows the South Korean government is unable to cover all its territory at the same time:

> The number of new coronavirus infections declined for the third straight day Monday **as the government nears the completion of tests on members of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus**, a religious sect at the center of the rapid spread of the highly-contagious virus, **according to officials.**

The same country which claims a 50% drop in cases happened also claims they just now have finished testing all the members of single church. And the sources are "officials" - that from a country where self-censorship in order to protect the government is cultural.

And, obviously, in a capitalist country with a working culture as precarious as the USA's, those containers with free testing are not nearly enough to do a complete quarantine of the country. Samsung will never allow an employee to take a day off just because he has "flu-like symptoms" or take his time to test himself in one of the containers, in a country where 15 hours working days (including unpaid overtime) are the norm.

I'm not even entering the fact that almost half of the South Korean is outsourced, i.e. don't have any working rights and benefits. Those obviously are not being tested, and are not bothering to being tested.

Posted by: vk | Mar 9 2020 18:29 utc | 3

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thanks b.. always thought provoking and informative..

this part which i quote - People must be made able to pay their bills even when they are sent into quarantine. The simplest way to achieve that is to make sick leave pay mandatory by law. Undocumented immigrants must be able to seek tests and healthcare without fear of deportation. That requires a change in the current mandatory notification scheme. - i take it you are talking most about the usa in the last 2 lines.. regardless - in this system it is all about keeping the money coming in for those who are taking it in... they are not going to want to change any of that... i think it is called capitalism... no rest for capitalism! it has to keep extracting money! i am really curious how and if humanity can get up on a different level then this!

i don't get paid for self employed work if i don't show up.. how is it supposed to work for the self employed who have to pay the extractor class?? either way - i agree with your ideas and about how to handle this virus.. trump is out to lunch and you might be right - it will cost him a re-election based on how he handles this..

Posted by: james | Mar 9 2020 18:31 utc | 4

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i see vk is trying to address the same topic i am... paying for people to not show up is not a capitalist thing!!! all hail capitalism!!

Posted by: james | Mar 9 2020 18:32 utc | 5

Are there any reliable sources about racial susceptibility to virus?

There were/are lot of claims Asians are most risky group, but considering virus originated there it is expected for most of cases to be Asians so far.

Also, except for China, Iran seems to be hit pretty hard (lot of high profile people infected and died). Any thoughts on that?

Posted by: Abe | Mar 9 2020 18:45 utc | 6

"People who test positive but show no symptoms should not be send home to their families."

And what exactly would be the occasion of this test, if the person has no symptoms and therefore wasn't seeking medical care? A press gang on the street?

Posted by: Russ | Mar 9 2020 18:45 utc | 7

Paid mandatory leave

No doubt coupled w/job protection, there is only one word for that ... Sooooocialism .... sooooocialism ... and that will turn 2us into Venezuela. Just ask Brian Kilemeade the former Sports commentator, now a FOX host and history book author. I am being sarcastic.

PML makes sense but maybe this is where my country finally gets its comeuppance by our own hand. We take a maximum economic and social hit because we are too busy doing Information War against China and Iran.

Posted by: Christian J Chuba | Mar 9 2020 18:51 utc | 8

With Russia rejecting a proposal by OPEC to cut 1.5 million barrels per day of production they have effectively cut the financial knees from under the shale producers. From Zerohedge, ..."While we hope to get an answer on both Saudi and US shale longevity shortly, and once the market reprices shale junk bonds sharply lower, we expect the US shale patch to soon become a ghost town as money-losing US producers will not be solvent with oil below $30, assuring that millions in supply will soon be pulled from the market, moments ago we got the answer as far as Russia is concerned, when its Finance Ministry said on Monday that the country could weather oil prices of $25 to 30$ per barrel for between six and 10 years."... Kind of like payback big time by Putin over the pipeline sanctions. Putin predicted this late last year as he hinted the USA would falter into 2020. Mr.Orange-man bought trouble for himself with Russia as Trump and the rest of his crooks cannot keep a deal or realistically operate in the atmosphere where Russia is working. Looks good on these no good banker queens. Cheap money, cheap shit! But Russia has the gold.

Posted by: Taffyboy | Mar 9 2020 18:51 utc | 9

Some people want to keep thinking that this virus is just a flu. That is just not true. The German media has been pushing this narrative- a disservice to the Germans. It is all science folks, something that many of us have forgot about. And the science says that this a good spreader.

If you want proof that this is more than the flu, just go to any Northern Italian hospital or some medical facility in Wuhan. These places get overwhelmed real quick – they just turn people away. Now you can try to talk to some of these people that just got turned down. They are having trouble breathing, have a high fever and they are panicking. It goes something like this: “So would you say that this is just like an ordinary flu?” “Excuse me - what was that ....?

Two doctors that I personally know here in southern Germany, last week, both turned down the request to treat a teenage girl staying at a small hotel here in our village who had flu symptoms. They told my friend, the owner of the hotel, to contact some health organization that I do not know about. He then told the girl’s family to cut their trip short and return home. By the way, he was not too interested in having his hotel shut down because a guest had tested positive.

So the medical staff in the country where you are at, will put a lot of pressure on the government to do something. Because people are dying since they can’t get the two to four weeks of intensive care treatment that they need. Therefore the governments starts shutting things down. That is the only thing that they can do. Doing what China has done works, but it also kills the economy. So you can see that a normal flu does not kill the economy but this one does and therefore that is why it is not the normal flu.

Posted by: meshpal | Mar 9 2020 18:53 utc | 10

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b wrote - 'Today's market crash and Trump's ignorant and disastrous handling of the pandemic" is not only extremely offensive but it shows how ill informed you are. Trust, that is not easy for me to write b/c you do such good work here day after day.

First, this virus or disease or whatever one wishes to call it is not organic as in natural. It is a bioweapon. Period. This is why alarm bells were set off in early January and not only here in the U.S. but Russia, Asia and Europe as well.

Absolute steps were taken then to contain the spread by Trump and his team - https://threadreaderapp.com/thread/1232752316211703809.html When he closed travel routes down any who were paying the slightest bit of attention then knew this bioweapon was extremely dangerous if it wasn't contained. For heavensakes, Russia closed down it's entire Eastern border. All advice, experience and counsel were brought to the table in early January and has continued to develop since then.

Having a President, a Chancellor, a Prime Minister showing panic before his or her constituents is reckless and irresponsible. You don't see the Wuhan virus being treated like a political weapon anywhere in the world but here in the U.S. Putin isn't having to calm his populace down b/c the media hasn't weaponized the virus for political purposes. Abe isn't having to calm his populace down because their media, again, hasn't weaponized it for political purposes. Same goes for Merkel, Macron, Johnson etc. Only here in the good ole USA is the corporate media weaponizing this outbreak.

And now you are apparently joining in. What a disappointment.

Posted by: h | Mar 9 2020 18:57 utc | 11

Summary of yesterday's numbers from the Tencent site:

Italy is now the coronavirus capital of the world. 1541 new cases yesterday with a constant 25% growth rate for the past two weeks.
- France and Germany also show high numbers: 20% growth and over 1000 cases in both.
- Iran and South Korea seem to have the epidemic under control, with decreasing numbers.
- USA has the highest growth rate at 28%: 127 new cases for a total of 582.

China had only 49 new cases, 5 of these in Hong Kong.
- Wuhan had 36 new cases,
- Gansu had 4 new cases. These are part of a cluster of ~37 cases traced to "overseas input".
- The rest of China had no new cases.

Posted by: Petri Krohn | Mar 9 2020 18:58 utc | 12

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meshpal | Mar 9 2020 18:53 utc | 10:

If you actually read the post you are commenting under, these issues would become clearer to you.

Posted by: David G | Mar 9 2020 18:59 utc | 13

This is a highly sane and helpful post. My thanks to MoA.

One quibble: the tweets linked from the phrase “the fatty lipid layer” are pretty dubious.

From the perspective of communicable disease, the purpose of washing the hands is to remove germs from the surface of the skin, not kill them. I’ve never before heard soap makes “viruses fall apart like a house of cards”, and a random tweet from one Palli Thordarson, a self-proclaimed “expert in supramolecular chemistry and the assembly of nanoparticles, but not a virologist” isn’t going to persuade me otherwise.

Whatever effects exposure to soap might have on viruses in laboratory conditions (though I’m still not buying “house of cards”), that’s not what is going on in real-life personal hygiene.

This MoA post would be even stronger without that bit of pseudoscience.

Posted by: David G | Mar 9 2020 19:02 utc | 14

Here within the Outlaw US Empire, I know of several corporations having standing policies to fire anyone trying to use their paid sick leave--a contrived reason can always be manufactured so the employee can't collect unemployment either--that's why people go to work who shouldn't. Then there're many states where paid sick time isn't mandatory--think all the states in the old Confederacy. As documented on earlier threads, Trump/Pence/Pompeo and others have shown their amazing amount of callousness and ignorance that ought to disqualify them from having any position of importance--yet, they're running the show.

As for the financial meltdown, that's been brewing ever since 2008 went unsolved for anyone but the banksters. Prices for most everything except basic foodstuffs are grossly out-of-line--average new car cost of $30K being but one example. Then there're the directors of the numerous college sports conferences who're now heading into their most lucrative time of year--March Madness and its numerous tournament games, venues and fans--many imitating Trump by saying they'll go on regardless public health and safety--always For a Few Dollars More. Some stars, like LeBron James, have stated they refuse to perform in an arena empty of fans, although it's difficult to tell if it's his overblow ego talking or his concern for fans and players wellbeing. In a way, it puts things into their proper perspective--what's more important: Public Health or the attitude of millionaire athletes and the Media and advertisers that make them possible? But the public is already taking the issue into its own hands as thousands decline to take a chance on becoming infected.

Posted by: karlof1 | Mar 9 2020 19:08 utc | 15

@meshpal #10
I would note that Italy has unusually low numbers of hospital beds, per 1000 population, even compared to 2nd and 3rd world nations: 1.x vs. US/China 3.x and France/Germany 6.4/8.3 vs. Japan 10+
I'd bet money that Iran is equal or worse due to sanctions.
So Italy is, in a real sense, a worst case for a 1st/2nd world nation due to its chronic underinvestment in hospital bed capacity (no doubt due to years of budget restrictions due to euro/ECB).

Posted by: c1ue | Mar 9 2020 19:08 utc | 16

I must admit that b changes my view. I still think though that I have reason to believe that Corona is not much more dangerous than a heavy flu wave (in the end 60ies in Berlin they had to shove those who had died in some subway stations that were out of use. This because of the many dead and the hard frost then the dead couldn't be buried in the hard frozen ground of the graveyards).
But the argument ,that there is no sufficient basic immunity level (like I believe there definitely was with "Swine flu") is convincing. This seems to be like with the native Americans getting infected (sometimes on purpose) by European settler with (I believe) Chickenpox and German measles - diseases that were next to harmless to the Europeans. And the native Americans died in large numbers then.

Posted by: Joerg | Mar 9 2020 19:12 utc | 17

@ Posted by: h | Mar 9 2020 18:57 utc | 11

After all these days, I've come to a conclusion: many westerners still buy this "bioweapon" conspiracy theory for one simple reason - it's the only narrative available that still puts the West (i.e. the USA) in control of the situation. The West may be in the shitter, but the Western elites are still the best humanity can put on the face of the Earth. I'm a serf - but at least I'm serving the best of the best. Therefore, the West is still ultimately superior (albeit in a very twisted way) to those nasty and disgusting yellows of China. The fact that many westerners will be infected and will die from this "bioweapon" merely comes from the fact that the Western elite is cruel, and is just a detail in the greater scheme of things. But the West is still the West, the top of the world, the culmination of humanity, the End of History.

Frankly, if you want to go that route, better stick to the nuclear winter (MAD) narrative. At least that is true.

Posted by: vk | Mar 9 2020 19:15 utc | 18

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